



ANTHONY HOPE

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SYNOPSIS.

Marcia Nettleton, a young widow, and her brother-in-law, Fred Nettleton, are stopping in the country, in England, with the latter's mother. They plan a two or three days' bicycle excursion to a distant point. On the evening of the second day out, in a heavy rain, and ten miles from an inn, Fred's bicycle breaks down. Marcia goes on, intending to send a trap for him, but misses the way. She comes to a house, rings and is received by its master, a good-looking young man. By a misunderstanding he supposes that her companion left behind is her husband, and by way of a jest she fails to correct the error. She is shown to a room where a man and all the necessities of a toilet are in readiness.

PART II.

"I do hope the carriage will find Mr. Nettleton," said Marcia. "Your husband, ma'am?" "Your husband, ma'am?" Marcia hesitated for a moment, then she smiled at herself in the glass as she answered: "Yes, Mr. Nettleton. My name is Nettleton."

"So I understood, ma'am," answered Susan. Prudence and herself have little chance beside the consciousness of looking one's best. Marcia entered the dining room with a bright smile. Her host shared her good spirits; he was laughing to himself as she came in. The soup was on the table. A manservant entered and drew a chair to a chair, inviting Marcia to seat herself. The young man sat opposite and helped the soup.

"Susan wishes to know, sir," said the manservant, "whether she shall prepare the cold preserves for the young man to eat?" "Yes, better," said he. "You're too kind," said Marcia. "But isn't there an inn to which we could go? We mustn't put you to all this trouble."

"The young man laughed. "Not within miles," said he. "Yes, Joseph, we'll have the red room ready—in case it is wanted, you know." "I'll tell Susan, sir," said Joseph. "Have you given the orders about the carriage?" "Yes, sir."

The young man turned to Marcia. "Where do you think your husband is?" "I don't know," she stammered—and truly enough, although there was no reason to take other than a hopeful view of the matter. "Oh, but whereabouts?" he smiled. Marcia suddenly remembered the position, blushed very red, and cried hastily, in the hope that her confusion had passed unobserved: "He's—he's—"

"Oh, you mean Fred! He's—he's—"

"That's more than a wife can always say about her husband," remarked the young man. "Do you think you can describe the place for us?" Marcia obeyed; Joseph listened, bowed and left the room.

"The carriage shall go and look for him as soon as possible," said the young man again. "Oh, and perhaps I might say that my name is Forrester—Noel Forrester. I hope you found your room comfortable?" "Delightful, Mr. Forrester. It really looked as if you expected some one."

"I am of a sanguine disposition," he answered, smiling, "but fortune outruns even my hopes sometimes."

He was charming, that was certain; but it was equally certain that he was not communicative. Marcia wished she had not begun her silly joke about Fred. She shrank from owing to it now; it would sound so foolish.

"Supper went on; food, wine and service were excellent. By the end of the meal, when Joseph brought coffee and finally withdrew, Marcia was in radiant spirits. She had forgotten poor Fred, still out in the rain; she had forgotten the rather unconventional nature of her visit; she had forgotten even the curious readiness of everything in the blue room. Undoubtedly Noel Forrester was charming; and she thought that she herself had been very agreeable.

"Marriage is a very pleasant condition," remarked Mr. Forrester, suddenly. "Oh—yes, very," murmured Marcia. "Provided," he continued, "that perfect confidence reigns between husband and wife. I have always insisted on that—I mean I should always insist on it if the occasion arose, it's essential."

"Of course it's nice," said Marcia. "I should require it from my wife," Mr. Forrester went on. "I'm very easy going, but I do like to be trusted. Don't you, Mrs. Nettleton? But I'm sure your husband must trust you implicitly."

"He never says he doesn't," murmured Marcia, hiding a smile. "I happen to object very much to be-

ing questioned," said Mr. Forrester. "My servants never question me; I don't allow my friends to question me. Most questions, Mrs. Nettleton, are either superfluous, or impertinent, or both. Have you observed that?"

"Yes, they are, most of them," said Marcia. "So none are asked in this house. Let me put your cup down for you."

He rose, but, by evil chance, as Marcia handed him her cup, she upset it in the saucer; a few drops fell on her gown. With a cry of dismay she began dabbing at the stiff with her handkerchief.

"I hope I haven't spoiled this lovely gown," she exclaimed. "Its owner would never forgive me."

"I assure you I should forgive you much worse things than that," smiled Mr. Forrester.

Marcia stared at him for a moment. He would not wear a red tea gown, but a question rose to her lips. She remembered his objections and paused. Besides, she did not wish to set going an exchange of questions; it might end in her own detection.

"A gown more or less is no great matter," said he, shrugging his shoulders. "But this is such a lovely one."

"I hope it fits you?" "It's a little—just a little—tight," she murmured.

"Ah, figures do differ," he remarked. "That's inevitable, you know."

Marcia's high spirits began to be dashed by a vague uneasiness; the distrust which had assailed her as she followed Susan to the blue room revived. It was nearly ten o'clock; surely Fred would make his appearance—soon! The position became embarrassing to her. She had to admit that no such feeling was displayed by her host. He had obtained her permission to light a cigar and was smoking composedly.

"How funny it would look if anybody found me here!" she said, forcing a smile. "But of course nobody will come now." Her assertion masked a question; did he expect another guest?

"I don't know about that," observed Mr. Forrester, smiling. "I didn't expect you, you know, but you came all the same. So somebody else might."

"I'm sure I hope nobody will." "Except your husband?" he half asked, half reminded her.

"Oh, except Fred, of course," she agreed, hastily. "His eyes dwelt reflectively on her face for a moment."

"Except Fred, I mean," he remarked with his pleasant smile. But Marcia, to her horror, felt herself blushing. Had he guessed her deception? And if he had—heaven, what might the man think or not think? At the cost of some humiliation she determined to confess her joke and put matters on a proper footing. She would look very silly, but that p. ally must be faced.

"Mr. Forrester," she began, timidly. "I—I think I ought to say—"

"I mean you won't find your husband. Oh, don't be distressed. The man will take a fresh horse and go in search of him at once. Ah, she's at the door!" For the bell was rung briskly. Marcia stared at him in a bewildered way.

"You see," he explained, "I haven't been able to send for Mr. Nettleton sooner, because my only trap had gone to the station. But never mind, we shall soon find him now—if he's where you left him, I mean."

"But—but—who is it?" "Who is who?" asked Noel Forrester. "Who is it who's come?" "He had walked half way toward the door. He paused to give his answer. "I can't be sure, of course, without looking," said he. "But it ought to be Celeste. Excuse me a moment, Mrs. Nettleton. And with a courteous bow he went out, closing the door behind him."

Marcia sank into a chair gasping. Who was Celeste? What was she to think of Celeste? And, worse, what would Celeste think of her? With a flash of horror she jumped to the conclusion that the gown she wore was Celeste's.

After a few moments, employed by Marcia in a succession of desperate and futile resolves, Noel Forrester returned. "It's all right," he announced, cheerfully. "They'll be on your husband's tracks in no time now, Mrs. Nettleton."

He sat down by the fire, Marcia, after a minute's hesitation, formulated her question. "And—your friend?"

"Oh, it was Celeste. She's just gone to get into a dry gown, she'll be down directly. I've sent up some soup and things for her."

"You've told her I'm here?" "Forrester gave a little start, and then an amused laugh. "Upon my word," said he, "I forgot to mention it. But it's all right. I'll introduce you, Mrs. Nettleton. You'll like her, I'm sure. She's not a bit stiff or strait-laced."

"But she'll—she'll be so surprised," protested Marcia.

"Most pleasantly, I'm sure. You can explain to her yourself, can't you? Tell her about your husband, and so on." He ended with another amiable smile.

"IT OUGHT TO BE CELESTE."

and again Marcia was conscious of hateful blushes. "Ah, I think I hear her step," he went on.

"But what am I to call her?" she cried, springing up and catching his arm. "To call her? Oh, to be sure! Of course! Oh, call her Forrester, Mrs. Nettleton. And with a merry laugh he opened the door.

On the threshold stood a very handsome girl, tall, fair and slender. At the first instant her lips wore an engaging smile; the next moment her eyes fell on Marcia; her face assumed an expression of intense surprise. She started back a step then came forward and entered the room with an air of mingled dignity and wonder. Noel Forrester closed the door behind her and came forward where Marcia stood in an agony of embarrassment.

(To Be Continued.)



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